



# Practitioner Inquiry

## Question:

**How will recruitment of basic students be affected when I pass out coupons for “free classes” or “free tutoring”?**

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### **BACKGROUND OF THE AGENCY, PRACTITIONER AND QUESTION**

Greater Pittsburgh Literacy Council (GPLC) is a non-profit agency dedicated to helping adults with literacy issues in Allegheny County. The agency uses volunteer tutors to work with Adult Basic Education (ABE), General Educational Development (GED) and English as a Second Language (ESL) students in a one-to-one or small group tutoring environment.

As the North Hills area coordinator for GPLC, my job responsibilities include recruitment, testing and placement of students in the northern communities of Allegheny County. This area covers approximately 800 square miles. This large geographical area has traditionally given me a wide volunteer base and I have

struggled with the question of how to find enough students to place with all the volunteers who come to our program. There has never been a problem recruiting enough ESL students so my focus concerns only ABE/GED students. Tutors complete our required tutor training and are anxious to start helping a student right away. I found that I have a longer waiting list of tutors than students and this has been a constant in my area for the past six years. The reverse is true in the other seven area offices (and in most adult education program that use volunteers): they can't find enough tutors to fill the needs of their numbers of waiting students.

The North Hills area is traditionally home to many highly educated professional people who hold education as a high priority. Most, also, are community-service minded and volunteering is the norm for them. Word of mouth recruitment is so effective in this community that I have not advertised for basic volunteers in over two years – yet I have historically been able to get enough volunteers who complete training to serve most of my students, refer some tutors to adjacent communities served by other area offices in GPLC and still have a waiting list of tutors. I know most agencies that use volunteer tutors would love to have this problem yet I feel this imbalance is even worse than having a waiting list of students.

My question comes from this dilemma of having more ABE/GED volunteer tutors than ABE/GED students to work with. Will recruitment of basic students be affected by passing out coupons for an already free service?

The problem has three separate issues: letting potential students know that our program is available to help them with attainment of educational goal, attracting

the potential students in a way that they don't restrict the meaning of the word "literacy" and making a collaborative effort with other community agencies.

As a graduate student at Kansas State University, I researched the topic of ABE/ GED student recruitment across the United States. Programs shared a common question of how to get the "most bang for their buck", in that, as a non-profit, money was a key factor in any recruitment technique. Several programs reported a considerable return for a minimal investment by using simple flyers or handouts in the recruiting efforts.

The use of "coupons" for an already free service was particularly successful. Our society seems to have a mindset to use coupons, whether or not we perceive a need for the product or service. Why wouldn't this carry over to adult education programs?

I recently discovered that a local program was using the free coupon idea with promising response. I thought this might be an answer to my dilemma of student shortage and worth a try in my area.

I also asked for cooperation from two other area coordinators from GPLC. One coordinator serves the McKeesport/Mon Valley communities and the other serves the communities north and west of Pittsburgh. Although these areas differ in demographics and don't historically have an excess of volunteer tutors; there was a desire to increase the number of students served in these communities.

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## **METHODS and DATA COLLECTION**

Data was collected by initially counting the number of “coupons” distributed in a variety of ways and making a tally comparison to: the number of calls for information, number of students in attendance at the mandatory student information session who stated that they had seen the pink card, and the number of students who actually enrolled in the program. I also collected correspondences from the other two area coordinators who participated in this study and kept a journal noting my efforts.

I started this recruitment effort by redesigning an idea for a student recruitment card (Attachment 1) that had been used successfully in the local agency in an adjacent county. This agency tried to use the premise that people feel obligated to use a coupon for anything “free”. The card stated the obvious; the who’s, what’s, where’s, when’s, why’s of the agency. In addition, it touted the advertising gimmick of “bring this card when you enroll”.

GPLC keeps a record of how students find out about our program so I customized the information for GPLC and included an arrow to emphasize the fact they should mention the card when they called for information. This was a potential problem in that they may not mention exactly that they saw a card but only mention the agency that gave them the information. Without the receptionist asking specifically if the potential student had seen the information on a pink card, I saw no way to precisely track student recruitment. Since my goal was mainly to increase enrollment, I proceeded with the effort, knowing that my results may not be accurate.

To make the card noticeable, I printed them on hot pink cardstock. I maintained the postcard size that the other agency had used since they mailed these to

potential students. I decided the hot pink would stand out amidst all the other literature usually printed black on yellow.

Next came the question of how to distribute the cards so they would reach potential students. When I distributed literature in the past, it was usually left on a table at local libraries or distributed to parents at a local Head Start program. Did the library or Head Start staff have enough of an investment in our program to really make an effort to help reach the students? I decided that they probably wanted to help their clients but literacy issues got lost in the myriad of other tasks. To change that, I decided I needed to make a more personal relationship with several potential collaborative agencies.

I started developing a deeper relationship with the Head Start program.

Although I had previously used the site for a successful GED class, which met four days a week, the staff had changed and the class had dissolved due to lack of students. I decided to meet with the new staff and educate them as to GPLC's mission and how we could help them help their Head Start parents. As part of my presentation, I gave out pink cards to be given out on a case-by-case basis, not as a general handout. The idea was that when a parent was meeting with a staff member and the topic of education (or lack of) came up, the staff member could ask questions to see if GPLC could be an answer. The student would leave with the card in hand as a reminder to call for information.

I then looked around the communities I serve to see if there could be a wider base for student recruitment. I hit one dead end after another until the day I was looking for a new site for a tutoring pair to use for their sessions. As is the norm, I contacted a church in the student's community and spoke with the pastor.

Immediately, he was not only interested in providing the needed space but also wanted to know more about how GPLC could help his community.

He told me that the Millvale community, at one time, had several elementary schools and a high school. All schools had been closed due to recent mergers and the pastor wanted to establish an “educational presence” in the area. This seemed like a perfect opportunity to use the pink cards to reach students and start ABE/GED classes in Millvale. He was happy to take some of the cards for distribution but suggested we also collaborate with the local food pantry sponsored by the North Hills Community Outreach Center.

The next step was setting up an appointment to speak to the director of the center. She was so excited about this new partnership that she immediately set up a joint meeting with the staff from surrounding communities, especially the food pantry specialists.

A final step was attending the food pantry locations during food distribution times. To date, I have visited three of the five locations. I was able to speak personally with 72 patrons while they were waiting for their turn to “shop”.

Distribution of the actual cards in the North Hills was:

100 – North Hills Community Outreach Center

72 – Personally distributed at food pantries

90 – Christ Lutheran Church in Millvale

20 – Veteran’s Administration Domiciliary Program

70 – Council of Three Rivers American Indian Center HeadStart program

60 – 20 given to each of three libraries: Laurie Ann West, Northland and

Hampton

412 Total for the North Hills area

The community agencies involved provide a variety of services. The North Hills Outreach Center provides assistance for individuals in a variety of ways. In addition to the food pantry, they offer emergency housing, clothing, job and educational counseling. The Veteran's Administration Domiciliary program provides housing and recovery support for homeless veterans in drug and alcohol recovery. The Council of Three Rivers American Indian Center houses the Head Start program as well as an adoption agency, Native American Indian museum and referrals for low income families.

A total of 500 pink cards were also distributed in two other GPLC areas to see if there would be any difference in recruitment in other communities. One area coordinator, who volunteered to assist with my project, serves the McKeesport/Mon Valley area.

Distribution of the actual cards in the McKeesport/Mon Valley area was:

25 - Duquesne Family Center

50 – 25 to each of two day care centers in McKeesport

25 - The Latterman Clinic

25 - 1<sup>st</sup> Step Recovery Center

75 – 25 to each of three community libraries

30 - YMCA (where the GPLC office is located)

20 - were personally given out to present students to recruit a friend.

250 Total for the McKeesport/Mon Valley office

Again, these agencies provide services ranging from drug and alcohol recovery to family assistance.

The other coordinator serves the northwest communities of Pittsburgh and includes the downtown area. This latter area also is served by the North Hills Community Outreach Center food pantries and is close enough in proximity to the North Hills that we share a student/tutor base.

Distribution of cards in the North West area was:

50 - Action Housing Inc.

50 – Providence Family Support Center

50 – North Hills Community Outreach Center (specific to the North West area)

50 – Reemployment Transition Center

50 – Light of Life Ministries

250 - Total for the North West area office

Action Housing provides housing opportunities for special populations in Allegheny County such as the homeless, mentally and physically disabled, and women and children in crisis. They also help low income single parents obtain housing through Section 8 and help with counseling and training. Providence Family Support Center provides educational workshops and support for single mothers and families. The Reemployment Transition Center helps individuals brush up on skills needed for the workplace in addition to providing their own GED training. The Light of Life Ministries provides shelter, soup kitchen and holiday meals for the homeless. They also help recovering addicts through support, lifeskills and workplace counseling.

To initiate the GPLC enrollment process, the student is required to attend an



hour and a half information session prior to enrollment. Two special sessions were scheduled to take advantage of busy times at the food pantries. Food pantries are busiest prior to major holidays so I targeted November (prior to Thanksgiving and Christmas) and April (prior to Easter) as months to distribute the cards at the food pantries. For this distribution, I printed cards with special information on upcoming information session, to be held at the food pantry. (Attachment 2) This accounted for nine of the eleven new students for the North Hills area.

## **FINDINGS**

Although not the overwhelming numbers that I had anticipated, this study resulted in eleven new students for the North Hills program, three new students and one new tutor for the North West program and two new students for the McKeesport/Mon Valley area.

(Attachment 3)

Results of the information session directly advertised by the pink cards showed the most impact. Seven prospective students attended the first session on November 17, 2000. Five additional students attended the second on May 17, 2001; three were counted in the North West office student count. All are currently enrolled as students. Three students from the first session have, to date, passed at least two of the five tests of the GED and look forward to goal completion this summer.

In my personal discussions at the food pantry, I didn't want to offend anyone by

assuming a low literacy level simply on the basis they had a need for the food pantry. I simply introduced myself and said that I wanted to increase the community awareness that our program could help address the educational concerns of the community. I also made them aware of the impending changes in the GED test. I continued my introduction by saying that if they didn't need our services that, perhaps, they could help spread the word by passing the card along or posting it on a local bulletin board. Two of the students who later enrolled said that they received the pink card second hand from a relative who had been given the card at the food pantry. Three others, who called for information but have yet to attend an information session or enroll, said someone else (usually a relative) had received a card and told them to call. As an aside, only one person was offended by being approached with information about an adult education program. I later discovered that this person had other issues unrelated to literacy and it was in his personality to be offended.

It is interesting to note that in the McKeesport/Mon Valley area, there has been an influx of students who have stated they came to us after being referred by another agency. Although only two people said specifically that they had seen the pink card, the others were not questioned as to how they had been referred. Inference can be made that the agencies were made to be more aware of GPLC as a direct result of the pink cards even though the students did not see the physical card. The coordinator stated that she felt the process helped her make contacts with agencies that she had not reached in the past. This has helped establish relationships that will hopefully continue.

The most important result of this project has to be the increase in collaboration between the North Hills office of GPLC and area social service providers. There has been an increase in the awareness that GPLC exists to help the same population that the social service agencies serve.

## **IMPLICATIONS AND FURTHER QUESTIONS**

An interesting outcome of this project is the potential for establishing a satellite center in two of the communities served by the food pantries. One of the local churches in Etna has volunteered space for ABE/GED classes and a small computer center. I am in the process of identifying volunteer tutors to staff this site and targeting this area for my next student recruitment effort. One of the food pantries that I have yet to visit is in this area and I have met with this director. She is excited about the possibilities and supports my efforts. This community has also been without an “educational presence” since the public schools merged several years ago. This is also an area with many low-income families, a high rate of unemployment and statistically lower reading levels in children as indicated by public school test results.

I also noticed greater name recognition of the GPLC program within these communities. As I meet with additional staff of the service agencies, libraries and churches, I no longer have to go into great detail about what our agency does. I’m fairly certain that this recognition is more a result of my personal

contact than the distribution of the cards.

The Council of Three Rivers American Indian Center has asked for 700 additional coupons so they can be included in orientation packets given to new Head Start parents. This request has already been completed with a card of slightly different information. The staff laminated the cards for a more durable reminder of what GPLC can do to help the parents achieve their own educational goals.

As a result of this effort, I was invited to address the steering committee of the North Hills Outreach Center Board of Trustees. The committee has decided to place a neighborhood wide focus on literacy efforts as a goal for the coming year. Part of that focus will most certainly be the development of the satellite center in Etna as well as collaboration with the Christ Lutheran Church in Millvale. Pastor George Mendez, of Christ Lutheran Church, has been discussing the possibility of scheduling adult classes at the same place and time as his current youth program called "St. After School". He has suggested a variety of recruitment ideas to reach potential adult students in this community. With his persistence, I am convinced this collaboration will happen.

I do plan to continue making personal contacts at the food pantries, alternating communities on a monthly basis. I have established a good relationship with the educational outreach coordinator of the North Hills Community Outreach Center and the directors of the pantries so that they will continue to give out the coupons and referrals whenever I cannot personally be there.

Another thing that I would change is the color I chose for the card.

Although noticeable and attractive, it proved hard to read. I have since read that psychologists say shades of red indicate “danger” or “stop”. A better choice would have been a light shade of green. Green indicates “proceed”, “welcome” or “go”.

None of this success, albeit limited, would have been possible without the support of the social service providers and clergy of the area. They have taken ownership of this process in light of community betterment. My recommendation for anyone trying to duplicate this effort is to begin by making contacts with interested agencies and individuals in the neighborhoods. Walking through an open door is easy; finding the key to open the door is essential. I believe the key is a supportive community.

## **Attachment 1**

# **FREE Classes**

- One – on – one, or small group instruction
- Flexible times and locations
- Study for your G.E.D.
- Brush up on your reading, writing, math skills
- Improve job readiness skills and performance

To register for your free evaluation,

Call: **412-487-8290**

***Mention this card when you call!***

*Greater Pittsburgh Literacy Council*

## **Attachment 2**

# FREE Classes

Come to a free information session

Christ Lutheran Church

917 Evergreen Avenue, Millvale

November 15<sup>th</sup>

6:00 – 7:30 PM

Please be prompt, no childcare provided, registration preferred

To register, call: **412-487-8290**

***Mention this card when you call!***

*Greater Pittsburgh Literacy Council*

### **Attachment 3**

AREA	Number Of cards Distributed	Number Of Calls for Information	Number Attending Information Session and Enrolled	Number Of New Tutors	Total Response From Coupons
NH	412	15	11	0	26
NW	250	5	3	1	9
MV	250	8	2	0	10
TOTALS	912	28	16	1	45